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ABSTRACT

Suggestions are made regarding ways teachers can help adult learners reduce their test anxiety. These general comments apply to content-oriented courses and may have some general applicability to all testing situations. The suggestions include clearly characterizing the test prior to its administration, planning for last-minute questions on test day, reviewing the content of the test in an organized way prior to test day, clearly communicating the grading and make-up policy in advance, identifying "test-anxious" students in advance and talking with them individually and privately, providing feedback as rapidly as possible, and providing feedback in terms of the range of class scores, mean, and distribution of letter grades. Other suggestions are treating each test score as private information, emphasizing learning instead of grades, using a color other than red for marking papers, including a mixture of types of test items, constructing the test so that the simplest items occur first, allowing students to make up and answer a test question for extra credit, and enrolling in a content course as a student. (YLB)

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TECHNíQUES

Helping adult students with test anxiety

By Michael Gadell

You probably remember the symptoms, even if you don't still experience them—sweaty palm, shaking knees, dry mouth, and the feeling that your tongue and lips may betray you by not saying what your mind is thinking. The anxiety that occurs before or during the course of speaking before a group is something that many people experience. It is easy to forget that some people experience the same feelings at the mere mention of the word "test."

Many adult educators operate in programs where there is no formal testing. However, for those of us who are required by organizational expectations and restraints to administer formal tests, such as in community college academic credit courses, there are ways the teacher can help adult learners (and younger ones, too) reduce their test anxiety.

These general comments will apply to content-oriented courses, and may have some general applicability to all testing situations. Remember that testing can have any of several purposes, and don't forget why this particular test is being administered.

1. Clearly characterize the test prior to its administration. At least one, and preferably several, class meetings prior to test day, share with the students the proportional content of the test and the types of items that will constitute the test. An example from my "Drugs and Behavior" course:

	Items	*Points*
Chapter 9—Alcohol	19	65
Chapter 10—Nicotine	9	16
Chapter 11—Caffeine	10	19
	38	100

	Items	*Points*
True-False	15	15
Multiple Choice	10	20
Definitions	7	21
Short Answer	3	23
Essay	3	21
	38	100

It might even help to point out specific test preparation advice which may seem obvious to some. For example, from the data above, point out that it would pay to spend more time studying the Chapter 9 material than the other chapters. Feedback from students has indicated that this type of information is very helpful to them in preparing for the test.

2. On test day, plan for a minute or two immediately before beginning the test to allow for last-minute questions or comments. For an individual student, clarifying one important point just before taking the test may make a big difference in his or her grade.

3. Review the content of the test in an organized way prior to test day. One technique my students enjoy is a game similar to "Trivial Pursuit" pertaining to the content material; they also are given the opportunity to earn additional points on their test score in advance by answering the trivia questions.

4. Clearly communicate your grading and test make-up policy in advance to students. Build in some mechanism to allow for illness, the car that won't start, or the sick child at home. Make certain the students understand what the policy is, then enforce it firmly and fairly (and with compassion).

5. Identify "test anxious" students and talk with them individually and in private. Help them to analyze their fear from the standpoint of "what's the worst that could happen?"

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6. Provide feedback as rapidly as possible. By all means try to return tests at the next class session. Include positive comments on test papers. This is an often overlooked channel of communication between teacher and student.

7. Feedback also is important in terms of the range of class scores, mean, and distribution of letter grades. Again, an example from one of my courses:

Letter grade	*Number of scores*	
A	7	Range = 66 – 100
B	10	
C	8	Mean = 83.6
D	3	
F	0	

Provide this information to the class. Emotional response to any given numerical grade may be quite different when it is placed in the context of the scores of the entire class.

8. Treat each test score as private information between you and the student. When returning tests to the class, shuffle the papers before distributing them if they have been arranged in ascending or descending order, so it will not be obvious who scored highest or lowest. Physically handle the test papers so peers don't peer at their neighbor's score.

9. Try to emphasize learning instead of grades. In general comments to the class,imply definitions of success other than "making an A." Mention of previous students who gained value from the course although their grades were not the highest should help.

10. Use a color other than red for marking papers. This may sound silly, but students may perceive (consciously or subconsciously) a paper marked in red as being angry feedback. Try green (for "go") instead of red (for "stop").

11. Include a mixture of types of items on the test. Some students excel at writing essay-type material, others at matching, etc. Provide an opportunity for everyone to excel on at least part of the test.

12. Construct the test so that the simplest, "easiest" items occur first. Meeting a few "confidence builders" early in the test may encourage an anxious student to continue.

13. Consider offering the opportunity for students to make up their own test question and then answer it for extra credit.

14. Enroll in a content course as a student yourself. Experiencing the testing situation "from the other side" can be a significant reminder of how real the pressures are.

A confident attitude by the teacher toward the students' ability is important – smile! Upon returning the test papers, invite discussion. Be flexible. Don't be reluctant to change scores if there was a misunderstanding. If learning takes place, don't be dogmatic about "right" or "wrong."

In general, reflect to the class your emphasis on *learning* rather than test scores, and it is possible – even probable – they will respond with the same emphasis! **AAACE**

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